

# Happy makers make happy customers

GR Dev Day  
11/5/11  
#grdevday



ATOMIC OBJECT

I co-founded Atomic 10 years ago with Bill Bereza.

Those 10 years have given me a grey beard, and some important lessons learned.

Since I'm going to talk from my experience in building and running Atomic, I thought it would be good to give you some context...





## Atomic Object 2011

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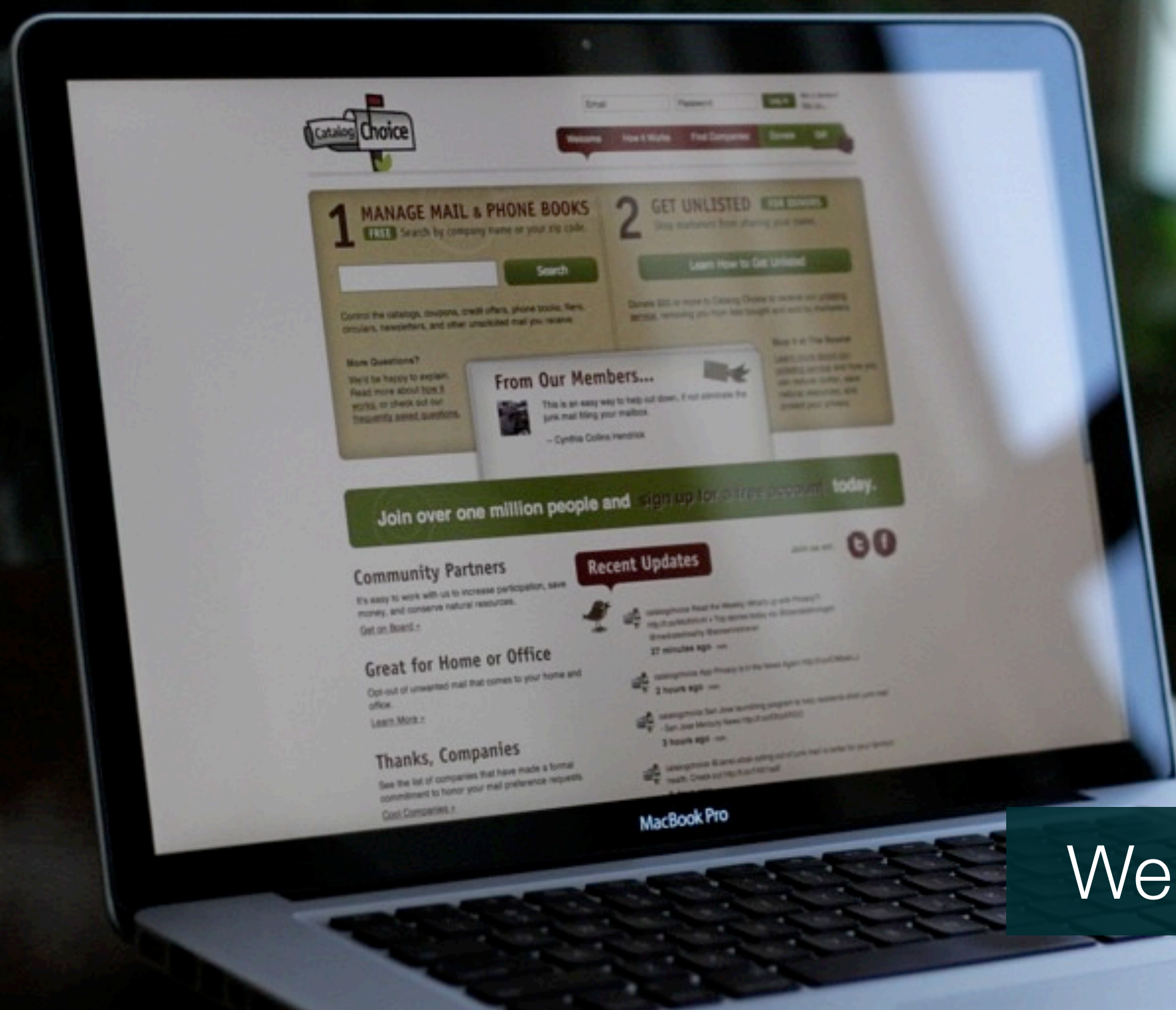
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This is our company as of last summer.

We're 32 people: developers, designers, tester, problem solvers, support staff.

We build web, mobile and embedded applications for companies ranging from startups to the Fortune 500...





Web

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This is Catalog Choice, the “don’t call list” of paper catalogs.

It has 1.2M users.



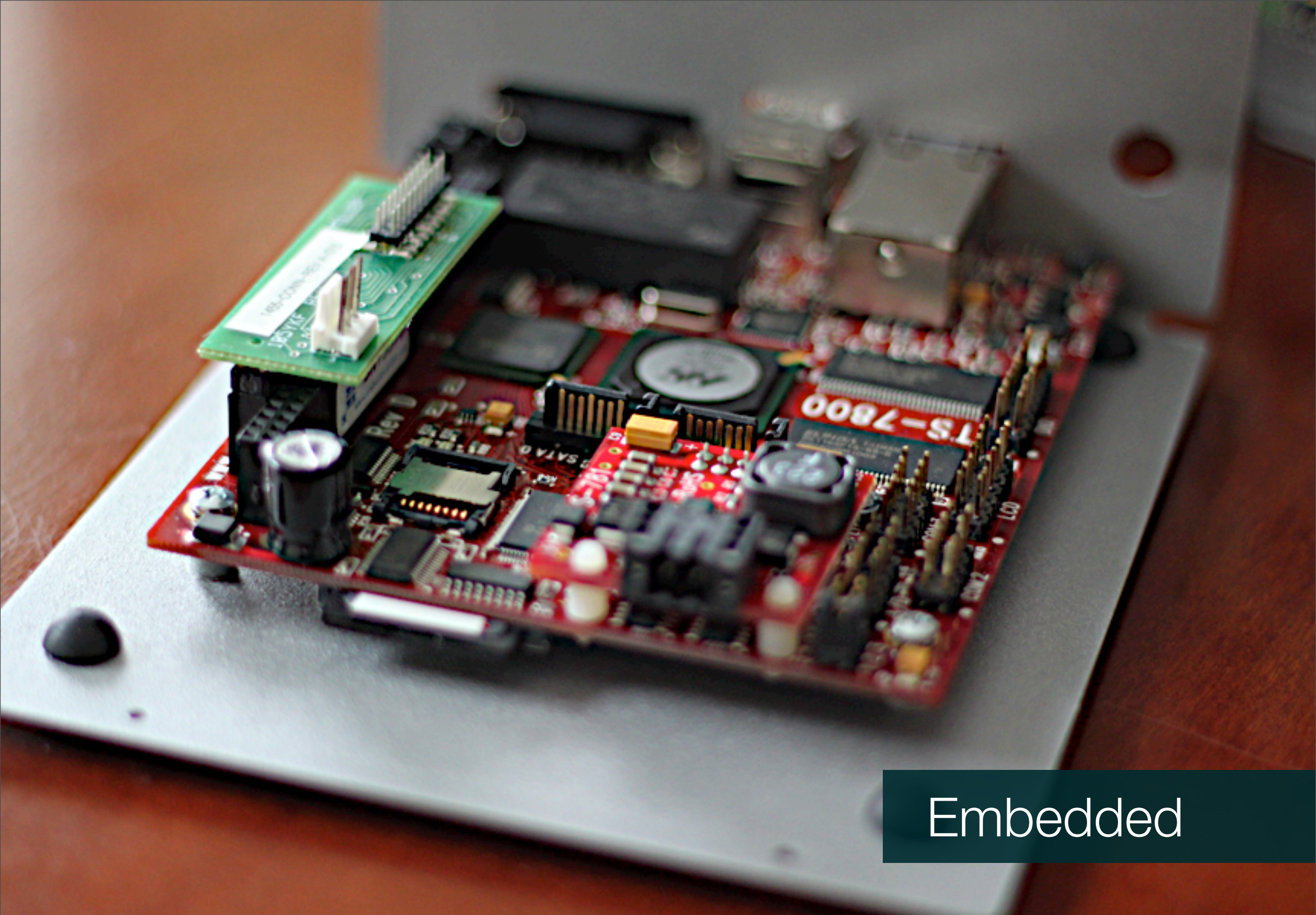


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Some of you may have used the Art Prize voting app...





## Embedded

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We got into embedded development 6 years ago when a firmware engineer at one of our customers told us “you can’t test my stuff”.

We pioneered agile development practices in the embedded space.

You might notice I didn’t mention desktop. I’m curious how many of you work on desktop applications of one sort or another?

A Java app for automotive factories was actually our very first project. We still do that work, but it’s been significantly displaced by web over the years.

We practice our craft on Wealthy Street in the old post office building...





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This morning I'm talking about happiness.

It's pretty clear why we all need happy customers.

Whether they're internal customers of the company we work for, or customers that buy our products or services, no customers means no business.

And unhappy customers eventually means no customers.

So how do we get happy customers? Can we buy their happiness by sending birthday cards?

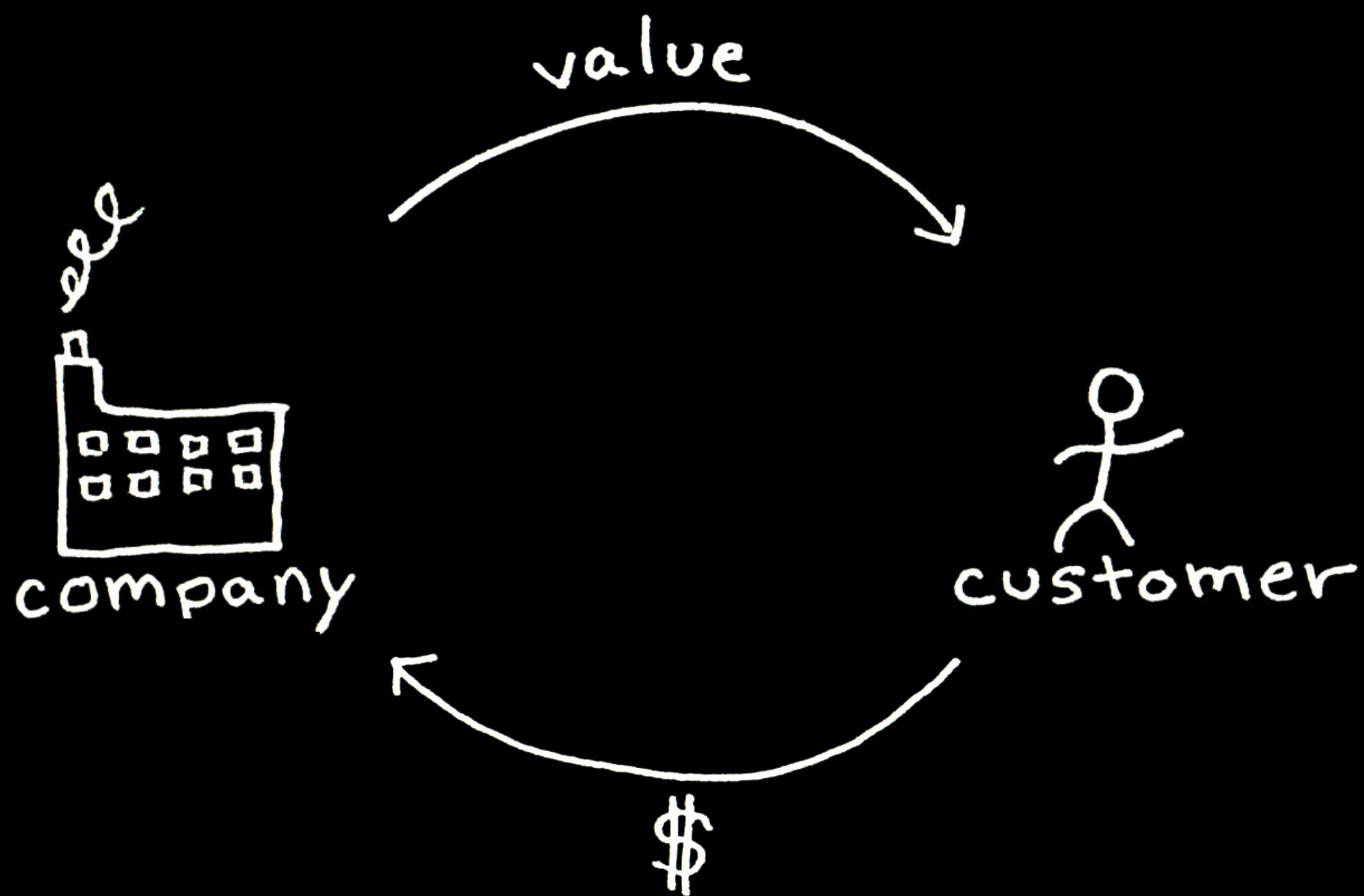




Or by taking them out to lunch?  
Or to play golf?  
Or hiring account reps to be attentive to their needs?

If you can, I've been going about this all wrong the last 10 years. That would have been much easier.

In fact of course I don't think it's this easy to have happy customers...

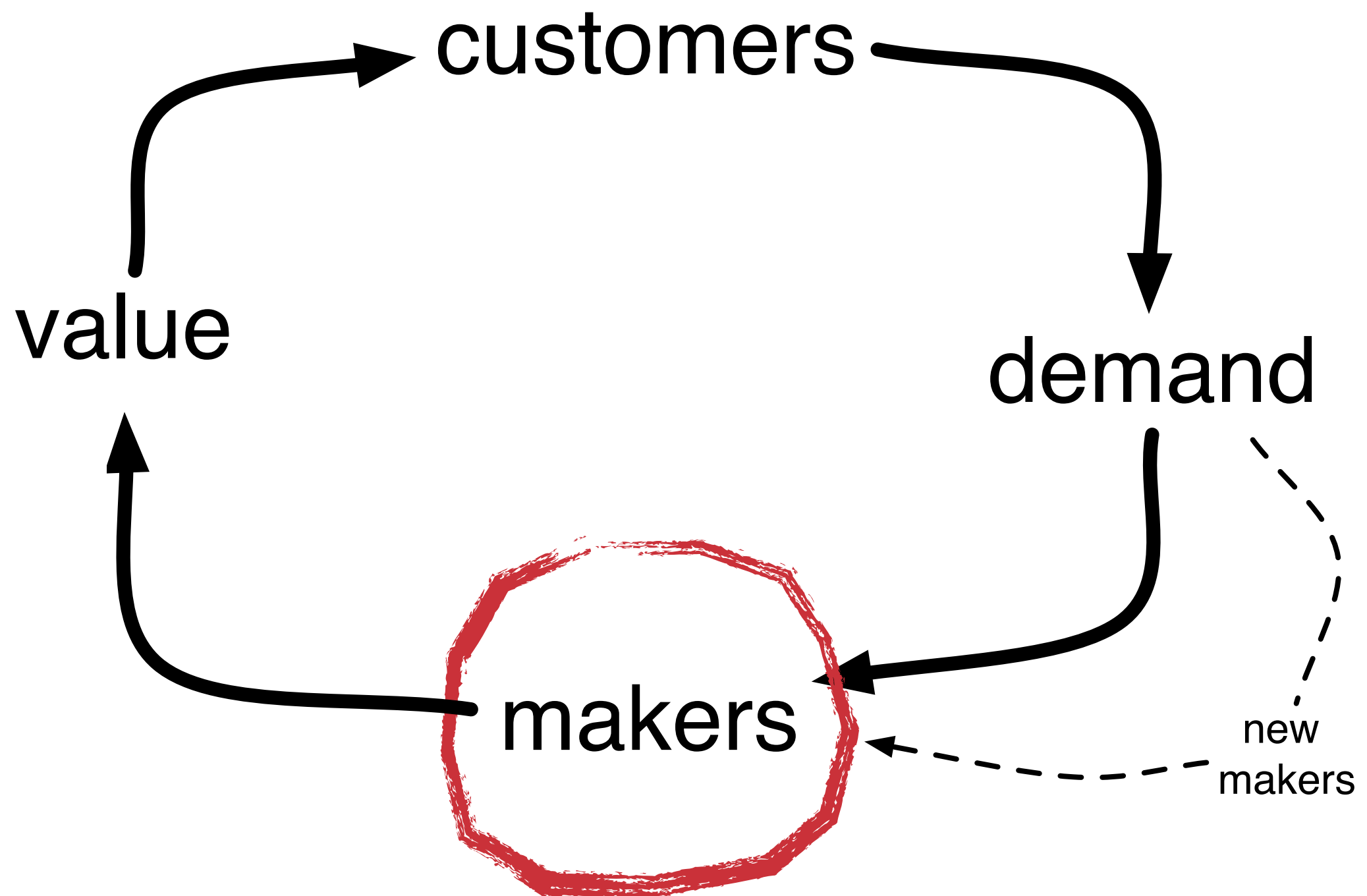


At its simplest, a business succeeds by delivering value to a customer who is in turn willing to pay for that value.

Let's look at how that works in a little more detail...



# Virtuous Cycle



Customers are what we want...

They need to have value delivered to them...

Value covers a lot of ground:

- quality, predictability in time & budget, creativity, respect for their time
- satisfying their emotional needs, responsiveness, alignment with business goals.

By delivering value the customers generate demand for our services...

Value is created by makers...

- that's a word I use for developers, designers, etc.

Notice that it also creates the opportunity to hire more makers...

People generally do their best work when they're happy, so we can control the power of this virtuous cycle by concentrating on the happiness of our makers...

Having happy makers also makes it easier to hire the best people, which further strengthens the positive feedback loop you see here

If this is what we want...





Happy teams

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Happy makers, happy teams (I think this was from one of our monthly SpinDown parties, so these guys might look unusually happy)

How do we get it?

Can we buy happiness?...





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Do toys make you happy? Nerf battles in the office, anyone?  
Is it your title that makes you happy?  
How about pizza parties? Fancy ergonomic chairs?

How many of you would be happier on Monday morning if your boss gave you a \$10,000 raise?...

The results of a very large study came out in the last year or so  
it showed that your day-to-day contentment and mood can indeed be improved, but only up  
to the point where you're making \$75k a year.

After that, more money doesn't equate to more daily happiness.

Studies have also shown that we all adjust quickly to changes in compensation. We're happy  
at first, but it quickly wears off.

So while money can be a powerful de-motivator (fairness issue), it's not a very effective lever  
for creating happy makers.

I find Daniel Pink's framework in his book Drive to be useful...



# Mastery Autonomy Purpose Craft Team

Pink identified three things that motivate people  
mastery – have the opportunity to get better, master your craft  
autonomy – control the work you do  
purpose – believe in the work you do

These things are common to all humans, not just makers.

But there are also two others that I'd add that I think are relevant to the goal of happy makers...

- pride of craft – interesting work, ability to control quality, seeing people use what you build.

- working with others – I believe that accomplishing some thing with other people is a great way to live a satisfying life, knowing you've got help when you need it, and a sense of camaraderie makes people happy.

What does a company or a group look like that can create happy makers?...



# innovation services

Something I've been quite keen on lately is the idea of innovation services firms.

These firms:

- sell their services, not products
- are comprised of makers, not just consultants or advisors
- work in collaborative teams which include their clients

Innovation services firms matter to the world because they are:

- incubators of talent.
- specialize in creating innovation.

I've found example companies in software, animation, environment design, entertainment, mechanical design, and interaction design.

By virtue of the fact that they require the best and most productive makers to stay in business, innovation services firms are good places to look to learn how to keep makers happy.

I think these companies have some common attributes...



# openness & transparency

This aspect has many dimensions: facilities, business practices, clients, projects.

What's really important, I believe is to have alignment and consistency across those dimensions.

Facilities can be “open” while being very closed...





No

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Sterile, isolating, un-human, neat, clean, orderly.

In contrast to this picture from the AO office...





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Messy, crowded, sometimes noisy, collaborative, informal, human.

Contrast those pictures...

This environment spreads knowledge, lets you know what others are doing, makes it impossible to hide, makes it easy to ask for help or offer help.

Your business practices should be open as well...



# finances sales marketing

We've practiced something called open books management since we started the company and well before I'd ever heard of the term.

This means every employee knows the financial state of the company.

At quarterly meetings we review:

- profit & loss statement.
- sales pipeline.

We have radiators for our marketing efforts...





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This shows a snapshot of traffic on our website

It also shows an internal measurement of participation in the company blog.

Clients and active projects should be aligned with the openness...



clients  
projects  
teams



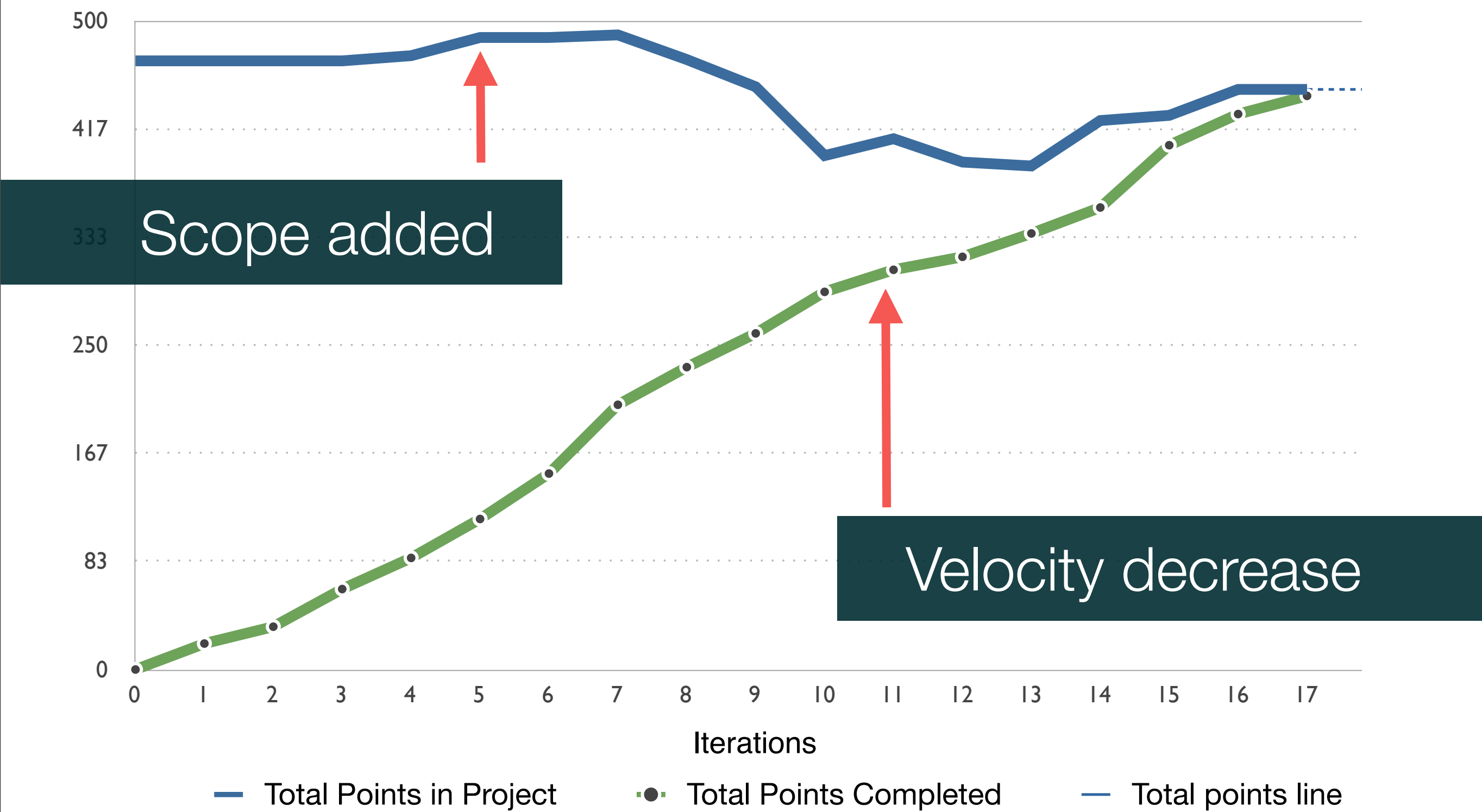


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We show our customers where we are on their projects in time & money every single week...





The weekly burn chart shows changes in projects scope, historical velocity, projected completion.

The team and customer share a tool that manages the backlog...



Iteration: Iteration 4 (2011-01-03 through 2011-01-09)		Budgeted: 0   Completed: 24   Remaining: 0		<a href="#">create story</a>
↑↓	Points: 7 – S11218 – D – Ind Profile – Markup Loc, Redemption, & Links	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 2 – S11181 – D – Markup stats section.	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S10818 – C – Ind Profile – Show Points balance and metrics	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 2 – S10827 – C – Ind Profile – Map of user's house, address shown	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S10828 – C – Ind Profile – Show address recycling info	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 1 – S10825 – C – Ind Profile – Show associated businesses	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S10823 – C – Ind Profile – Display curated rewards	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
Iteration: Iteration 5 (2011-01-10 through 2011-01-16)		Budgeted: 0   Completed: 30   Remaining: 0		<a href="#">create story</a>
↑↓	Points: 8 – S10822 – C – Ind Profile – Search vendors from user dashboard	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S11270 – C – Production Deployment	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 2 – S11237 – X – Offer Redemption – Instructions	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S11272 – VM – TIS Integration – Buttons Design Update	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 1 – S11273 – VM – TIS Integration – Nav Design Update	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S11274 – VM – Offer Redemption – Redesign reward on vendor profile	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 4 – S11275 – VM – Login form design	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 1 – S10797 – D – Login form design	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	
↑↓	Points: 2 – S11240 – VM – Offer Redemption – Confirmation Dialog	<a href="#">Take this story</a>	<div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div><div></div></div>	

Task Backlog

Each task has an estimate so we can track our velocity.

We involve our clients with their teams as much as possible...





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We have a corporate apartment to put clients up in.  
We take advantage of various electronic means of communicating.  
We have the whole team attend the weekly iteration meeting.

It's important for makers to know who they are working for.  
It's important for clients to know who is working for them.

Shared values makes for happy makers...



# your 'why' values

If you know why you're in business, and you have shared, clearly articulated values, you'll find more alignment, easier recruiting, and a common purpose.

Your 'why' might not be obvious...





Mel Bugai introduced me to Simon Sinek's idea of "your why"

what – you do

how – you do it

why – you exist

Articulating your why helps bring alignment in your company or team and might even be valuable for marketing and recruitment.

I believe innovation services firms have a hard time articulating their why because of what they do.

My first "why" statements were all about our what and how.

Then I realized that the what and how are part of why we exist.

Atomic's "why" is:

– to build great software, and find better ways of doing it.

We use value mantras as shorthand for what we hold dear...



give a shit  
share the pain  
teach and learn  
own it

We refer to these when we're deciding company guidelines, how to handle tricky situations, employee expectations, recruiting, assignments.

Understanding and alignment on values keeps us focused on what matters...





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It helps maintain our culture.

Which is all about:  
co-located  
polyskilled  
self-managing  
teams of makers

It's what reminds us that spending \$60k a year on professional development makes great business sense...





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This is Marissa and Brittany on a layover in Denver on their way to attending a usability workshop.

And why we stop to celebrate milestones like our 10 year birthday...





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This is all Atoms and their spouses at a weekend we hosted up north this summer to celebrate our birthday.

I'm turning this over to you now for questions...



prof dev

hiring & firing

tools

innovation

standards

compensation

assignments

ownership

governance

Here are a few specific areas that I have ideas on how practices can make happy makers.

Any other topic is fair game as well.



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